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SUBJECT: NIGER TRIP REPORTS (1) ILLELA: LESSONS LEARNED FROM SMALL  
TOWN NIGER

REF: 06 NIAMEY 1141

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (U) In December, Poloff conducted extensive travel to Niger's Tahoua and Agadez Regions. One outcome was a series of in-house trip reports providing readers with background on the issues, people, and preoccupations of several key towns and sub-regions. With the expectation that such a "virtual tour" of Niger would provide useful background for a broader audience of Niger watchers, this cable series will provide front-channel versions of those trip reports. The first stop on this virtual tour of northern and central Niger is Illela, a town one hour south of the central Nigerien city of Tahoua; seat of a prominent traditional chief and "chef lieu" (seat) of Illela's urban commune and department. Illela is interesting precisely because it is ordinary. A stand in for so many other towns in the agro-pastoral belt, it affords a realistic view of life in rural Niger. END SUMMARY

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OVERVIEW OF TOWN AND COMMUNE  
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¶2. (U) Illela is the seat both of an urban commune and an entire Department NOTE: a Department is the next level up from a commune in the Nigerien administrative hierarchy: there are 265 communes, 36 departments, and 8 regions; thus far, communes are the only administrative entities to boast elected governments, although the corpus of decentralization law envisions eventual elections for Department and Regional level governments. Departments are currently run by appointed Prefects, and Regions by appointed Governors. Both answer to the Minister of the Interior END NOTE.

¶3. (U) Illela's Prefect, Ali Djadje, was absent during Poloff's visit. Poloff met his immediate deputy, the Secretary General (SG), Abdou Ango. The Chef de Canton d'Illela (Serkin Illela) is Elhadji Kadi Oumani. Illela Department's population in 2001 was 256,813. Roughly 80% of the population is Hausa; the remainder is Zarma, Tuareg, and Foulani.

¶4. (U) Several NGO's and IO's are present: the Italian cooperation entity CILSS, Concern, and the Red Cross. NGO/IO Intervention priorities include: malnutrition (Red Cross), poverty reduction and control of desertification (Italians), emergency feeding / schools and healthcare (Concern).

¶5. (SBU) GON installations include: the Prefecture; bases for two paramilitary police units, the National Forces for Intervention and Security (FNIS), and the Gendarmerie (each has one "Brigade" of approx. 30 officers), and a local hospital supported by UNICEF. Communications: Illela has Celtel cellular telephone service (covering a 30km radius from the town center), while competing cell phone service provider Telecel has a tower up but has not yet begun

service. The town has no internet access.

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LESSONS ON TRADITIONAL CHIEFTAINCY  
AND A WORD ON TRADITIONAL SLAVERY  
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¶16. (U) Poloff initially decided to stop in Illela to learn more about traditional slavery in Niger and about an influential royal house that has done much to combat it. Moustapha Kadi Oumani, an anti-slavery activist and leading figure in the Nigerien civil society movement known as the Coalition Equite Qualite hails from here. He is the oldest son of the traditional Chef de Canton d'Illela. NOTE: Illela is the capital of the traditional region of the same name, which denotes the chief's domain, but no longer corresponds to an administrative boundary. END NOTE Some years ago, Kadi convinced his father to free all of the family's slaves, setting an important example in a region where this problem has deep roots. Illela is the northern point in what anti-slavery NGO Timidria's President, Ilguilas Weila, describes as the "triangle of shame," an area where traditional slavery is still frequently practiced. The triangle's south-western and south-eastern points are, respectively, Birni N'Konni and Madaoua.

¶17. (U) The father of the current Chef de Canton was an influential man in former Nigerien dictator Seyni Kountche's time (1974-1987), and the Canton Chieftaincy of Illela remains powerful and well respected. NOTE: Nigerien traditional chieftaincy consists of three levels, ranked hierarchically: chefs de village or, in cities and larger towns, chefs de quartier (neighborhood); chefs de canton, who are elected by their subsidiary village or neighborhood chiefs; three Chefs de Provance (Province) in Dosso, Tibiri(the Serkin Gobir), and Maradi city (Serkin Katsina). They are elected by subsidiary village and canton chiefs. Finally, there are two

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Sultans: Air (Agadez) and Damagaram (Zinder). Like the others, the Sultans are elected for life-terms by subsidiary chiefs. In contemporary Niger, the traditional chieftaincy has a role as both conservator and, occasionally, reformer of tradition. END NOTE

¶18. (U) Poloff was unable to meet the Chief, who, along with the Prefect, was called away to supervise the election of a new village chief in a place called "Ratta." Nigerien villages elect their chiefs, usually from among competing noble families. The Ministry of the Interior (represented in this instance by the Prefect) supervises the elections. Poloff took advantage of the spare time to learn about a model development project.

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REFORESTATION: OLD USAID/PEACE CORPS PROJECT  
STILL BEARING FRUIT:  
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¶19. (SBU) Secretary General (SG) Ango is a forestry official, originally from Birni N' Konni. Forestry cadre civil servants do not usually rise to the level of SGs - Ecole Nationale pour l'Administration et Magistrature (ENAM) graduates tend to get those jobs. Ango was probably a political appointee, but appeared a good choice for Illela by virtue of his prior experience. He ran the successful "Pastoral Management" project in Illela from 2002-2006, when he took over as SG. Ango's overview of the project explained how and why Niger is "greener now than 30 years ago," (reftel). It also shows how an old USAID / Peace Corps intervention is still yielding fruit.

¶10. (U) USAID gave the Illela- Keita-Bouza triangle priority for its initial natural resource management projects in Niger in the late 1970s. These projects were funded by USAID and implemented by CARE and the Peace Corps. The work done in this area was held up as a model for the rest of the Sahel, and continues to inspire reclamation efforts to this day.

¶11. (U) One such contemporary effort is on display just south of Illela. Funded by the African Development Bank and the African Development Fund and implemented by the Ministry of Hydrology,

Environment, and Fight against Desertification, the Illela project covers 1,749 hectares of eroded, rocky ground just south of town. 1,230 hectares are listed as "degraded land," (read: eroded; limited top soil washed away by too much rain, leaving only rock); 519 hectares are listed as "wooded areas;" and, 390 hectares are listed as having been otherwise "reclaimed." While "reclaimed" land is good for grazing animals, the 390 hectares of "wooded" land appears the most successful aspect of this project. Rife with potential for income generation and soil replenishment, the woods were loaded with marketable and usable plants. Gum Arabic trees were prominent, as were the latex shrubs used by locals to seal wounds, and other plants such as Andropogon Guyanense, which is used for thatch. Still others were used for animal fodder or firewood.

¶12. (U) Illela town and seven nearby villages share the pastoral site. A 2003 estimate indicated that the locals could harvest as much as 6 million CFA (\$12,000) worth of fodder from the reclaimed area each year. This year, however, they only took out about 2 million CFA (\$4,000) worth. SG Anjo praised a former Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) who had done a study in 2004, which indicated that the site could provide up to: 9 tones of Gunna (desert melon) for food; 5.6 tones of Cassia Tora for food; and 5.5 tones of malohiya for a traditional Nigerien green sauce, among other things. The PCV had left Anjo with a slick PowerPoint presentation on the project, on which he relied extensively during his presentation to us.

¶13. (U) Gum arabic trees can produce sap after only four years, though it is better to wait until their production reaches full stride, usually between 5 and 15 years of age. After a tree reaches 16 years of age, production steadily declines, though good stewardship can keep it productive until age 25.

¶14. (U) Conclusion: The Illela reclamation project is a symbol of what Niger can get right with a little external financing and a "sensitized" local population. As noted reftel, community buy-in based on the demonstrated profitability of such ventures is essential to their acceptance and success. While Illela and the surrounding villages are not yet realizing all of the profits predicted for them in 2004, they are off to a good start and getting a much needed economic shot in the arm. END COMMENT

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Food Security and Agricultural Development:  
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¶15. (U) SG Anjo noted that Illela was part of the "Red Band" of food insecurity (evidently so called because of its depiction on the color-coded maps of food-security donors) that runs from Ouallam through Illela, Tanout, and Goure to N'Guigmi. Noting that Illela

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faces "chronic food deficits," Anjo expressed gratitude for Concern and Red Cross efforts. One of the principal challenges to agricultural productivity is top-soil erosion caused by extensive rainfall.

¶16. (U) Whenever it rains in Illela, it pours. The town has always had a problem with erosion. Its broad streets are subject to inundation during the rainy season, and the channels that crisscross them attest to the destructive effects of the water on local infrastructure. While Illela was spared the fate of Bilma and Ingall (two Nigerien towns whose mud-architecture collapsed following heavy rains last year, leading to a minor humanitarian crisis) 2006 was a year of heavy rainfall, and the SG noted that this had made it difficult for some people to farm normally. The town is divided into two parts (roughly 1/3 and 2/3) by a seasonal watercourse that becomes impassable at the height of the rainy season. Lacking a modern bridge or barrage, "Kietaray," the smaller 1/3 portion, is isolated from the rest of town. During the winter season, people use that watercourse as a gardening site to produce guavas, lemons, lettuce, and cabbage, making the best out of a sub-optimal situation.

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EXODE AND THE "REMITTANCE ECONOMY:"  
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¶17. (U) Tahoua region is famous for "exode" - seasonal labor migration toward the West African coast. Illela is no exception in general terms, though geography and culture influence destination. While the Tuaregs of Tchintabaraden and Abalak head for Libya and Algeria, the Hausas of Illela beat a path toward Cote D'Ivoire, apparently unfazed by that country's tarnished promise.

¶18. (U) "Quartier Plateau," which features new concrete houses that are small but well-adorned and conspicuous in this town of traditional baked-mud "banco" architecture might explain the continued allure of the coast. Built by Illelans who had gone to Cote D'Ivoire and engaged in small commerce, these status symbols represented both the success of the "exodants" and the aspirations of so many others like them. Its promise evident in brick and mortar, "exode" seems a tradition with a long future ahead of it.

¶19. (SBU) Perhaps because of the traditional focus on Cote D'Ivoire, little in the way of Nigerian cultural export was evident in Illela. There are no foreign financed mosques or Koranic schools. Most children go to government schools and attend traditional, Sufi, Koranic schools in the evenings. While discussions with traditional chiefs and religious leaders would provide more grounding for this general impression, there seemed to be little evidence of a move toward Nigerian-style "Izala" fundamentalism in Illela.

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CONCLUSION: MIDDLETOWN, NIGER  
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¶20. (U) Everything seemed to be on an even keel in this typically Nigerien town. Decentralization seemed to be going smoothly, with no real conflict between the locally elected officials and the Prefect. According to the SG, none of the commune council's actions had raised legal issues (one of the Prefect's responsibilities is to review commune decisions to ensure consistency with law and administrative regulations). From the potential of the land reclamation project to the problems of hunger and erosion, to the promise of the remittance culture, Illela's successes and challenges provide a snapshot of life and hope in provincial Niger. ALLEN